

ATHEISTIC METHODS IN THEOLOGY

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All attempts to illumine clearly the point at which the theological conflict among us arises render a commendable service. So it is fitting to welcome the contribution by Paul Jäger in *Die Christliche Welt* 25 (1905). Without sentimental phraseology and with serious effort to establish a clear position, Jäger demands that theology utilize "the atheistic method." His remarks were prompted by Lütgert's statement¹ that even in historical observation and judgments God is not to be ignored; an untheological theologian would be a self-contradiction. To this Jäger replies that the atheistic method is the only scientific one: "We wish to explain the world (including religion, whether its social formation or the experience of the individual) on the basis of this world," i.e., "we wish to explain it, without any recourse to the concept of God, on the basis of the forces that are immanent within the world process." In Jäger's view, then, today's dominant leit-motif in all branches of science must function in the same way in theology. Jäger has therefore boldly countered Lütgert's remark: While Lütgert indicates that it is impossible to ignore God, Jäger answers: 'Entirely right! And we do not wish to ignore him; rather, we wish to negate him.' For whoever wishes to explain all phenomena "immanently" (on the basis of this-worldly factors alone)—whether Jesus' divine Sonship or our own knowledge of God, whether human sinfulness or the apostolic gospel—does not ignore God but negates him. Any recourse to God is here excluded not only temporarily from scientific thinking, say in the interest of producing pure, authentic observation, but is categorically banned. The essential characteristic of theology becomes that it is blind to God. "The scientific method," says Jäger, "*ignorat deum*, knows nothing of God."

This blindness toward God is naturally characteristic of the theologian only in

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terms of his scientific functioning; as a religious person he does not possess it. The religious person keeps his piety separate from his scientific endeavor. In this regard Jäger's presentation is not some new proposal that could hamper scientific observation. It is the old, sharply delineated dualism that we have long since learned from Kant, Jakobi, Schleiermacher, Fries, etc.: The heathen head and the pious heart, the atheistic scientific knowledge and the religious sentiment, etc., etc. Yet in contrast to the older attempts to split up the person, the situation has shifted significantly. Formerly the atheistic head produced things like natural science, knowledge of the world, philosophy; piety, including theology, stood alongside these as a separate domain. Now Jäger argues not merely that our interpretation of nature or epistemology is unavoidably atheistic and knows nothing of God; he says this of *theology*. The dualism which he recommends to us takes the following form: As theologians you interpret religion immanently, apart from God; as religious persons you consider it to be relationship with God. In other words, as theologians you must demonstrate what you as Christians deny. And as pious people you have to affirm what you as theologians oppose.

Logically it is entirely clear—or as Jäger might put it, "explicable in purely immanent terms"—that the older forms of dualism are carried further in this harsher formulation. Since religion is a part of human history and, parallel to that, of individual life-histories as well, there exists a science of religion. If science is inherently atheistic, and if it is obligated to wall itself off from the concept of God, this inevitably applies to the science of religion, too. Once one has assigned to "piety" the task of stating its views in opposition to the "scientific explanation of the world," one must also grant it the capacity to state its views in opposition to theology. But this intensifies the old dualism to such extent that it is bound to tear apart both the individual personality, inasmuch as it participates in the scientific and religious life simultaneously, and the fellowship that is peculiar to the church.

Jäger calls his article an aid "toward understanding"; this subtitle is completely appropriate, since what he writes sheds bright light on the entire difficulty of our church situation.² That which is still unclear in what he says merits thorough consideration.

1. SHOULD DOGMATICS ALSO BE ATHEISTIC?

Regarding this question Jäger's remarks are imprecise. His final formulation of the problem ("The question we face is this: Should theology be religious science or the science of religion?") is muddled. We all support the science of religion, i.e., scientific inquiry whose object is religion. And the issue is also not "religious science" in general without determination of its object. The question turns rather on the formulation of the relationship in which science stands to religion as fact and experience. Does the science of religion affirm or deny religion? Does it dispute religion and dismiss it as illusion or give an account of it? The question centers not on isolated specifics and ramifications of religious occurrence, but on the central matter, the affirmation or denial of God. The logical confusion of Jäger's question arises from the confidence with which he puts forth his concept of science as the only possible and valid one. From the outset "the science of religion" means for him the atheistic criticism and explanation of religion. That is why he sees it in self-evident logical opposition to "reli-

gious science."

Jäger goes on to say about his science of religion: "Since science does not acknowledge God, the science of religion and therefore also scientific theology have to do only with the subjective attitude of man. This holds true for the history of religions in general as well as for biblical and church history." Here theology is conceived exclusively as history, and dogmatics, along with ethics, is either forgotten or eliminated by a hasty amputation. Even if it be only forgotten, the fact that a theologian can speak of the superfluity of the concept of God in theology, without so much as even a thought for dogmatics, is highly illuminating.³ Yet the problem is not the specific formulation of Jäger's train of thought. It lies in the fundamental orientation of the approach he describes. The aims with which the dogmatician and ethicist go about their work are taboo for "scientific theology." In other words, it would be a mistake to suppose that the atheistic method of theology implies an atheistic dogmatics and ethics; these must, on the contrary, simply cease to exist. If our historical observation is thought to establish firm conviction regarding God, so that some event becomes for us a revelation of God, Jäger's response is that such "inconsistency in academic work would have to be called dogmatic method and rejected." Dogmatic and scientific are here conceived as mutually excluding opposites, and the denial demanded for the one by each component of the other is for Jäger self-evident. True, he wishes to establish for theology its rightful place within the entire complex of scientific work in the university. But his concern does not extend to theological labor in its entirety. In the university and in the sphere of science, the dogmatician and the ethicist are nothing but withered trees to be cut down.

Since Jäger wants to move us "toward understanding," it will be helpful if opponents of thinkers like Lütgert and me get a clear grasp of why we do not renounce dogmatics as a science. Emotional attachments are not what move us, as if our mood required production of some sort of conceptual literature to stay afloat. Far more important, though not yet finally decisive, is the consideration that the renunciation of dogmatics destroys religious community. There is no Christian congregation without dogma, without shared affirmations resulting in common convictions. So the question of what grounds and shapes the Christian congregation and its fellowship as a common certainty is of profound importance for every Christian. And the more unsteady and fluid the spiritual devotion of the congregation becomes, the more important the question grows. Now an opponent might reply to us: 'What kind of a narrow-minded notion this is; as if science had anything to do with praxis or theology with the church!' But such protest would reflect thinking that is really not modern at all but breathes the spirit of a past generation, one haunted and tormented by the shadow of a fanciful "pure reason" which in older times fluttered around over reality and therefore never made connection with the praxis and the great social relations of life which shape us. In the contemporary university a theology would be eminently justifiable whose most earnest concern were to provide the church the theory it requires for it to be a religious community. Indeed, with their scientific work even our medical authorities and natural scientists, our national economists and historians, stand in intimate relationship to "practical" tasks of the present time.

Yet in glancing at the church's need we have not yet touched the most profound

reason for insisting on dogmatics. We must have dogmatics *for truth's sake*.

Jäger's reduction of "theology" to history sidesteps the truth question and thereby does damage also to the concept of science. The historian who seeks to observe what happened, and under what conditions, and what is perhaps a causal factor lying behind an event, is unquestionably obedient to the canon of truth in his work. But that same canon sets him limits. To the extent that he is the observer intent on an object, he grants the canon its power. But only to that extent: To go farther would be to suspend the canon. The canon cannot furnish him, as long as he is only a historian, unconditioned mastery. He holds his own personality in a state of suspension and abstains from forming the judgment that he might be inherently inclined to make. Thus he presents religious illusion as well as the ethically pure will, the frivolous atheism as well as that faith which upholds the Protestant doctrine of justification, with the same fidelity "as a photographic camera," to use Jäger's phrase. Even the inner life of the individual is understood according to this same method: The historian elucidates how the religious conceptions arise within him; which circumstances cause them; what becomes visible, perhaps regarding causal links, between the events he scrutinizes. With this his attentiveness has borne all the fruit it can. His knowledge has reached its limits. Is his task complete? If we say yes, then we are in a cowardly way evading the truth question.

No refinement in the historian's art can alter this. We may deepen the concept of "history" ever so much; we may be realists in the highest sense in historical research and bear within us the deep conviction that what has occurred in the past affects us with causal force, that the past generates and forms us even in the course of our thinking and willing. Nevertheless, at no time are we able to grant absolute formative power over us to past events, so that the narration of that which once took place renders our own judgment superfluous, tradition replacing our own thinking and external norms of volition, acting on us from without, replacing our own volition. We remain continually summoned to an act of thought in which our own personality forms its judgment. That is a central tenet of biblical, or if the opponent does not grant this, certainly Protestant spiritual devotion. The historian, however, never reaches this point; he must maintain a suspended state of personal indecision and irresolution, so long as he is nothing but a historian and knows nothing but that which took place in the past. And that is why a theology that is nothing more than history is intolerable for the Protestant church and is its death: Such theology leaves untouched its scientific obligation.

Jäger is governed by the dictum: dogmatic, therefore unscientific. But in fact the relation between the goal of historical and dogmatic theological inquiry runs in the opposite direction as soon as the truth question in its absolute form is opened up without restriction and stipulation. For a theology which can only tell little stories and thus is frozen in indecision and thoughtlessness is a farce when measured by scientific standards, even if it gives its historical novels titles like *Life of Jesus* or *New Testament Theology*. Such a theology must cower in shame when compared with the realism of natural science—but also compared with the earnestness which inheres in the history of language, of law, of the nation and the state, etc. On the other hand, if theology does not permit its goal to be attenuated and leaves room for the truth- and God-

question with their absolute gravity, then it stands parallel to the other branches of research in their close ties to reality. Admittedly this opens the possibility that we will also receive negative, atheistic dogmatics and ethics, e.g., a dogmatics for which the atheistically-conceived, closed-nexus concept of the world does not function solely as a "methodological" principle but is earnestly affirmed, thus transforming theology into cosmology. However, a negative dogmatics, which opposes the concept of God and of course is obligated to ground its thesis in the same way as positive, God-affirming dogmatics, will always be an aid to clear distinction and decision in thinking and volition, while the reduction of theology to mere history with its endless observing and penchant for exotic religious expression radically undermines thought and volition in the end.

2. WHY SHOULD THE HISTORY OF RELIGION BE ATHEISTIC?

Let us now follow Jäger where his interest leads him: Why does the history of religion require the atheistic method? With welcome clarity he states his claim not as a theoretical certainty, scientific proposition, or the like, but as a decision: "We will" to explain the world immanently, so the scientific "leitmotif" should be purely immanent in conception, i.e., conceived in such a way that the God-question may not arise at all. I call this welcome because it says good-bye to formulations like absolute science and pure reason. Jäger thus makes use of an important gain in today's understanding of the knowing process; he too is aware of the close relation between the course of thinking and willing. All thinking contains within it a volitional component, so that what "we will" appears in our science. In saying this, of course, none of us attributes to ourselves a sovereign power of establishing facts that is exempt from all substantiation and justification. If thinking and willing are bound together, then thinking is not denied and reduced merely to willing. For Jäger, too, "The leitmotif" of science "is something arrived at and sustained by thinking."

The question therefore stands before us: Why do "we will" thus? In the first place, who are the "we?" Formerly, right down to the previous generation, they did not exist in the church. True, rightly or wrongly the exclusion of the idea of God from theological observation, occurred often enough; nevertheless, up until the present time there was never a theology that as a matter of principle banned the idea of God from its sphere of labor and sought to explain religion "immanently without recourse to the idea of God." Not until recently have the "we" made their debut. Jäger himself tells us as much: The type of theological work that he recommends is as a matter of principle distinct from all earlier work in the church, which he deems to have been "unscientific." Now for the theologian the unity of the church is not some trivial notion having absolutely nothing to do with the effort to perceive and understand with all possible diligence the transformations that have taken place in the church's thinking and willing. Commonality with the earlier work of the church takes on great weight for the theologian because of the easily sustainable observation that we, in our own religiosity, are incorporated into a common life binding successive generations to one another. In view of the whole inner situation of Protestantism, however, it is not at all surprising that Jäger facetly makes a radical break. What can the past offer to the theologian?

"We cannot close our minds to the fact," says Jäger, that we have to forge a new theology, one that breaks with all that has heretofore gone by that name. So forget about the ancients, who in their unmodern unscientific way thought that they must deal earnestly with the knowledge of God in theology! "We" in the universities must internalize and further modern definitions of our goals. And why is this the case?

"We will to have a scientific theology, i.e., a science of the religious life, that stands in precise contact with the scientific awareness and labors of our time. We want to remain in touch with what is today generally regarded as scientific." The atheistic method "is the seminal scientific idea of our time."

Is Jäger observing correctly? It seems to me that here once again mists from an earlier time have blurred his vision. The absolute rationality and explicability of nature was at one time the leitmotif for the Cartesian and Spinozan interpretation of nature. But is it really still true today that natural science is ruled by the motivating principle: "I wish to explain, and to do so on the basis of purely this-worldly factors"? Natural science wishes to *observe*, certainly also to explain, yet only so far as observation suggests causal connections to us. And that is utterly true of historical science! Where is an earnest laborer in the discipline of history who is not painfully aware of the immense difficulty involved in really seeing and observing in the face of historical processes, and how much caution is required of us to guard against cheap pseudo-explanations? The concept of the world as Jäger wields it, which he understands as a self-generating and self-sustaining unity, does not come from the observation of nature, much less from historical perception, but grows from speculative roots. It is on this basis that Jäger demands of the theologian that he undertake what every other scientific enterprise refuses, namely, to allow its operating principle to be forced upon it by allegedly omniscient speculation. In rejecting Lütgert's thesis, "In every historical method lies a hidden dogmatics," Jäger at the same time furnishes the finest evidence for it. For his idea of "world," which confers atheistic self-sufficiency on "world," so that in the entire realm of historical occurrence nothing may or can become visible except for "world," constitutes in itself a dogmatics. But it is a dogmatics that is worthless at the outset, because it is not arrived at and substantiated by effort but rather adopted as law merely because "everyone" accepts it. "The age accepts it; therefore I must accept it, too"; that is certainly a novel theological method; till now such talk was never heard in the church.

We all see that atheistic tendencies are widespread in the universities. We also all see that they contain at least a measure of the earnestness of scientific verification, i.e., they are based on our contemporary view of nature and arise from careful apprehension of the discrete systems that make up the natural process as well as the power pervading that process even to the whole of the inner life. If Jäger had said: "You must explain religion on the basis of nature; everything that you call religious experience is a physical occurrence, and the concept of God is a confused synonym for nature," then his formulation would actually stand in continuity with the currents of the time. And it would likewise point to one of the great challenges that our present age poses for theological work.

But mark this. Even if we come to terms with the scientific energy that animates

today's atheistic mood, and if we keep alive its power over the circle of those who labor in the realm of research and new discovery, that still gives no legitimate basis for the will that states: "We will to explain religion solely on the basis of this-worldly factors." What obligates us as members of the *universitas litterarum* [the scholarly guild] as an inviolable duty is that we, in the field of labor appointed to us, succeed at seeing, at chaste, unsullied observation, at a comprehension of the real event, be it one that took place in the past or one that is just now happening. That is the *ceterum censeo* for every labor within the university. Science is first seeing and secondly seeing and thirdly seeing and again and again seeing. From this vocation nothing absolves us, whatever else may occur in other scientific fields of labor. Let us grant that the atheistic disposition of the natural scientist arises in natural science with compelling necessity, or that the cultural historian in the course of his observations generates, legitimately and unavoidably, a skepticism worthy of Montaigne. Still, none of that would ever in itself legitimate the atheistic theologian, nor relieve us of our duty to approach our own field of labor with open observation. The fruit of colleagues' work may have the greatest significance for us, or it may create problems of weightiest, indeed impenetrable mystery. Regardless, the theologian remains obligated to regard the realm of occurrence entrusted to him with resolute devotion to his own object. He can arrive at the verdict of atheism only by way of observation of the religious occurrence itself. If he borrows it from the general mood or natural science, then his atheism dishonors him. If theology were a comprehensive knowledge of the world like the older philosophy, then it would admittedly have to go borrowing and begging. There are, however, entirely distinct events which produce both the certainty of God for humanity and within the individual life. This certainty is bound up with them and works its effects through them. As theologians we owe these events an eye that is not deceived by a borrowed leitmotif but that seeks to comprehend its object with a complete devotion to it. Even if it were true that the natural scientist nowhere found cause to arrive at the idea of God; even if it were true that the historian nowhere encountered events pointing beyond humanity, nowhere encountered a law greater than human will, nowhere encountered a judgment that breaks to pieces human will as sin; even if it were so that also in the theological domain of observation there nowhere emerged a well-founded consciousness of God, nowhere except—let us say: in the way that Jesus lived in God, here however it emerged as an undeniable reality with a power demanding assent from the theologian—in this case the basis and content of theology would be admittedly small, but atheistic theology would be destroyed. Jäger, however, does not wish to engage in painstaking observation; he knows *a priori* that in Jesus he is dealing only with man, just as he also knows *a priori* that when he encounters the sinful will in man, he has only come in conflict with a human notion of what matters.

"Theology," Jäger states, "stands on equal footing in the framework of the *universitas litterarum* only so long as it too can, frankly and honestly and not just in appearance, advocate the universally recognized scientific methods." But there are no general methods which can be transferred from one area of inquiry to another beyond those rules that are grounded directly in the way that cognition takes place. Therefore it is a general and inviolable scientific rule that every judgment must be preceded by

painstaking observation, and all our own conclusions must be preceded by the act of reception, without which our own production bursts into wind and illusions. The atheistic conception of the world is not a category constituent of the act of cognition. Surely the history of recent generations proves this sufficiently. Up to and including the time of Kant's death, the concept of God was looked upon as an essential possession of reason. For the generation after Kant the self-consciousness of reason was one with the consciousness of God. Now for the "we" blindness toward God is the essential attribute of all science. Theology is too serious a matter, and it is entrusted with an area of life too significant, for it to allow itself to ape such deviations in servile deference to fleeting contemporary moods.

Jäger offers us the friendly advice "to have the resolve to withdraw from the university" since we do not find ourselves in agreement with the atheistic disposition in it. For us, too, our honor in the sphere of scientific researchers is an important regulating principle, for the simple reason that it is an effective means of work, which is what gives honor its moral worth in all relationships. But it remains for the moment an open question whether we have lost that honor by openly remaining theologians, to the extent that individual energy permits, and as theologians observing honestly and thinking valiantly. And it is far more doubtful that the atheistic theology would deserve that honor. In any case, the atheistic theological enterprise would be the most certain means of destroying the theological faculties. If it ever really comes to pass that our students read the New Testament just like they read Homer, and our exegetes explain it like they do Homer with determined elimination of every God-directed idea, then the theological faculties have reached the end of the line.

3. WHAT DO WE LOSE WITH THE ATHEISTIC METHOD?

Jäger fears no loss from his method: Only the theologian would be atheistic, not his personal identity; only the method of scientific work, not the personal status of the worker; only the science, but this would be merely "the maidservant of human inquiry, not its lord" and "does not speak the last word."

But here the concept "method" contains a striking ambiguity. It merely points a "way," Jäger claims—but the choice of the way occurs here through the fixing of the goal. The proposition: "We will to explain Christ, and for that matter Christianity, both as corporate entity and personal experience, on the basis of this-worldly factors alone, without any reference to God," contains a fully determined intellectual goal which specifies the result of the entire theological enterprise. Here method does not simply furnish preliminary guidance dealing with the technique which theological work should employ. Rather it pronounces a judgment on the emergence and essence of religious phenomena. If I say: Chemistry is to be explained on the basis of physical processes, or that changes in philosophical outlooks are to be explained from the differences of climate and nutrition, these are no longer methodological principles but theories which must not be allowed to govern observation but must rather emerge from observation. Of course, I can make merely methodological use of such principles; in this case I use them to bring into sharper focus those phenomena in my area of investigation which my theories regard as the sole causative powers. There has

never been a theory that cannot in turn be employed methodologically. Thus also Jäger's thesis may be employed merely methodologically. Then it says simply that we have to take account of what it signifies for the religious occurrence that it is incorporated into the cosmic, historical nexus. But we hardly need Jäger's encouragement to take this step; such methodological impulses have been fully and effectively adopted into theology for more than a century already, i.e., since the theologian too had to deal seriously with the concept of history. If that is all that Jäger intended to state, then why his polemical tone and talk of the fresh beginning of a new theological enterprise, different from all that has gone before?

But Jäger also has cheerful counsel for those who have accepted the abandonment of the concept of God as determinative for theology. They should still feel quite free to exercise their piety undisturbed as befits their taste and capacity. But this freedom stands on mysterious footing. The strivings of the older generation (Schleiermacher, Fries, etc.) to establish and secure such a dualism were incomparably more earnest; what we hear in Jäger gives the impression of being disorganized and lacking in profundity. So, for example, he suddenly talks again of "higher knowledge." In the old dualism this expression made tolerable sense, since it regarded only the understanding of phenomena as atheistic; alongside that understanding some "higher knowledge" might still crop up somewhere, say if alongside pure reason yet another, additional reason were discovered. But now, after even theology is to be atheistic—where does "higher knowledge" still come from? Jäger likens the results of theological labor to a photograph that captures the object at a certain angle, noting that "obviously it doesn't achieve everything." What kind of a mysterious spirit could achieve more? Would it maybe embellish the photograph or even impart motion to its image? It is true enough, as Jäger writes, that the theologian does not speak the final, most profound word. But then who does speak it? Certainly not the New Testament, for we have already "explained" it "without recourse to the concept of God."

In such an approach neither science nor religion retain what is due them. After science has first explained everything in purely human terms, it now suddenly becomes remarkably modest, more modest than is permitted if it really *explains*. First it has been demonstrated to us scientifically that our praying is obviously only a monologue. Then there suddenly comes a "higher voice" and overturns the verdict of science, and science—it beats a hasty retreat. Will it really be so well-behaved and silently take its leave at the right moment? First science elucidated for us how Jesus' self-consciousness necessarily acquired its eccentric form under pressure from the ideas and tendencies present in contemporary Judaism. Yet we endorse this chain of thought only as "theologians"; we retain the freedom to believe his claim in which he designates himself the One having come into existence through God. But what about science! Oh—let's forget about it for the moment. *Genuine science is not there so that we can forget about it.*

How solemnly Jäger begins: "We want a scientific theology!" Hats off to this magnificent aspiration! The appearance is given of occupying the heights of resolute love of truth, of being gripped with a burning desire for certainty and an earnest longing for reality. But where we end up does not match where we started out: Intrinsic to this "science" is a profound skepticism. It passes judgment on everything, bold, sover-

eign, "without recourse to the concept of God." Then it ultimately confesses that it actually does not compel any particular judgment that would amount to a seriously binding affirmation, nor does it want to.

In negotiation with Kantianism it has already been said quite clearly for a long time that dispensing with the idea of God is inevitably tantamount to dispensing with the idea of truth and is therefore destructive of science. The way in which Jäger dismisses his "science" at the moment it is convenient for him is more support for this argument.

And religion? Here too one need only repeat what has already often been said: Such a dualism makes unattainable a complete, life-determining devotion of the self to God. How can double-mindedness be avoided if the theologian and the Christian stand in irreconcilable opposition to each other in one and the same person? Greatest caution is required toward that which delivers from science, i.e., delivers from the canon of truth and earnestness for truth, working mischief in us individually and in the church in the form of feeling, opinion, "ultimate word," etc.

Of course Kant is also brought in to console us: Science has to do only with "appearance," not with "essence." But the natural scientist who breaks off his experiment, says to himself "All just phenomenal" and doesn't take seriously his results does not deserve our admiration. Nor does the historian studying Caesar Augustus or Napoleon who suddenly claps hand to forehead, cries out "Only phenomena!" and on that account grants the last word to a "higher voice" instead of to his investigation. The same goes for the theologian, who first explains religious activity atheistically and thereafter primly says: "There you are; I have explained only the appearance; think what you will about the essence." We have no other life than that which we lead as persons endowed with consciousness. In this life, so constituted, a faith surrendered to God arose and continues to arise. The flight from this life to a "thing in itself" is a sham.

4. WHAT DO WE GAIN WITH THE ATHEISTIC METHOD?

It is possible to speak of an advantage only if the method is seriously employed solely as "method." That means it gives direction to the observer's attention, which applies itself to the relation between religious occurrences and the "world." In this respect Jäger's hopes are not entirely illusory and are in part confirmed by scholarly methods already long in use. He can rightly say: It would be highly instructive to see how far an interpretation would get which contemplates religion, thus e.g. Jesus, the New Testament, the church, our personal faith, only as a product of humans and the world. The concept of "world" is no phantom; we also cannot measure *a priori* to what extent the historical sequence of events is a closed unity. Far less can we measure *a priori* how the presence and activity of divine grace and truth are mediated within that unity. To be sure, presently the physiological aspect of the concept of "world" is still meaningless for the theologian. Questions like: Are the religious processes contingent upon individual formations of the brain? If so in what way? To what extent does race exercise an influence? etc., result only in empty prattle. Such observations obtain theological significance only when they have become an assured part of anthropology and are not just empty words for an impenetrable mystery. It is different with those observations which are directed toward the relationship of the

individual to the people, of private thought to speech, of the individual will to the collective will of the community, of the spiritual heritage of some present moment to the past and the logical and ethical bonds transcending the individual which are at work here. Along this line we have already observed much. And there remains much more painstakingly to assimilate in the areas of biblical history, church history, and the course of individual lives, our own as well as others. But offsetting this gain from the approach hailed by Jäger as the exclusively justified one is a vast quantity of mistakes. And the more his approach ceases actually to be method and assumes lordship as "leitmotif," the more it becomes a disastrous source of error.

Observation is not an empty word; the wonderful ability to see is granted to us, also in the historical sphere. By observation we can discern the occurrences that form the inner life of the human individual and of humanity. And yet—how fragmented and divergent our contemporary theological literature, even in those matters that are determinative for our judgment on the basis of ostensibly empirical considerations! Why? Because it is just as certain that observation requires the use of our own eyes, and they are informed by that which, as our intellectual holdings, exercises control over us. The relinquishing of ourselves which is part of every authentic observation, which takes the form of devotion to that which has happened, can never and should never obliterate us. We are the ones who must see, and our eyes are our primary equipment for carrying out the work of thinking. That is why it is no light matter which "leitmotif" we submit ourselves to. Now if we determine to explain religion based on solely this-worldly factors, then from the outset our observation consistently stands in radical contradiction to our object, which emphatically does not lend itself to such explanation, but loudly and steadfastly insists upon the concept of God. Our object intends that we think about God; the observer wills to think "without recourse to the concept of God." Here lies a sharp conflict of wills; if enmeshed in it, are we still able to see what lies before us? And the more we determine not merely to observe but also to explain, the more the object is shaped to fit into the scheme that we have already constructed, and the more our work becomes a caricature of science. What purports to be science transmutes into polemic against its object, and the result is not an account of the past but a novel whose main character is the historian.

Perhaps the opponent will rebuke me by calling attention to the antiquated theology which "explains" the world and Scripture "solely on the basis of God," along with that theology's historical attainments in exegesis, in christology, in the preservation and shaping of the recollections of the experiences of the church, in the biographies of the saints, etc. There, the opponent will point out, it was not the "atheistic method" that was guilty of clouding the picture of history, but its opposite. I take it to be just as little the calling of the theologian to "explain religion solely on the basis of God" as to "explain it solely on the basis of this-worldly factors." The theological rationalism of the Greeks was as mistaken with its postulates as the profane, modern manufacture of conjectures is. If we succeed at truly grasping what generates the certainty of God for us humans, how that certainty so secures itself in us that it becomes certainty and we are able to believe, how it manages to furnish us the inner motivation for will and action, so that the love of God arises and obedience springs up, and all this in such a

way that not only hermits here and there in shattered isolation experience the illumination of God's light, but in such a way that the church of God comes into being—that would be theology enough for now. Admittedly such theology does not come about “without recourse to the idea of God”; it rather has its sole object and goal in him.

Briefly just a couple more matters: The invitation for us to subscribe to the atheistic method of theology has been published in *Die Christliche Welt*, which takes great pains to stay abreast of the growth of Catholic theology. If one looks back at the relationship between Catholic and Protestant theology in the first half of the nineteenth century, the reversal in Catholic outlook is highly instructive. Does *Die Christliche Welt* think that the atheistic method in Protestant theology will improve that relationship? Will that relationship be enhanced by the Protestant faculties' avoidance of the truth-question, their burying the question of God and their “explaining religion solely on the basis of this-worldly factors”? If the Protestant faculties still talk of “religion,” but no longer retain any knowledge of God, and their Catholic colleagues are the only ones left to pose the question of God, and they answer it by the means at their disposal (even if these are only the means furnished by Thomism), then it is likely to become obvious pretty quickly who needs help from whose theology.

And one last point: Jäger's summons has reminded us of the dignity that we possess as members of the university. As already stated, I absolutely respect this appeal to the high intellectual ideals of our universities. But it is not only to colleagues in the philosophy department that we are under obligation. As members of the university we have our dignity above all in that we stand as teachers before those studying under us. Should we turn our young people into ministers according to atheistic method? Should we face them having retreated to Jäger's position: “True, theology that has surrendered the concept of God does not achieve everything; but there are still final, deepest words beyond theology? Certainly: There are still final words to be added to theology proceeding on atheistic premises. And sometimes they will be unwelcome words—yet sometimes words by which actually someone besides the theologian begins to speak, tearing atheistic theology, its concept of the world, and its concept of religion locked up in human subjectivity to shreds.

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NOTES

1. [Wilhelm Lütgert (1863-1938), New Testament scholar and theologian who studied under Schlatter at Greifswald in the 1890s, had delivered a paper at the Eisenach Conference in 1903 in which he challenged Ernst Troeltsch's separation of the theological and historical tasks. Jäger's essay responds to Lütgert's address. See Heinzpeter Hempelmann, “Nachwort,” in Adolf Schlatter, *Atheistischen Methoden in der Theologie*, ed. by Hempelmann (Wuppertal: R. Brockhaus, 1985), 32-35.]

2. Whoever shares Jäger's view cannot possibly be surprised if those who are deeply concerned for the gospel manifest a deep suspicion and spirited protest against “theology,” and if for many in Germany it is gradually becoming a weighty question how the church can be sup-

plied with suitable clergy, since the scientific activity of the theological faculties is becoming increasingly unsuited for this.

3. It is also interesting that ethics is forgotten, because it documents the scant connection that exists between the theological activity called for by Jäger and the New Testament. Simply reading the Epistle to the Romans does not make anyone a Paulinist, but it is hardly thinkable that someone reading Romans could avoid colliding with the problem of the will. He would from then on be aware of questions like: What does the exercise of fleshly will involve, and what about spiritual, divine willing? How do we become free of the former and participate in the latter? etc. And whoever is gripped by such questions certainly does not forget ethics when he speaks of the goal of theology.

